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Mortality

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Technologies of the human corpse

by John Troyer, Cambridge and London, The MIT Press, 2020, 272 pp., \$24.95 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-262-04381-6

Brenda Mathijssen

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us to reflect on how birth and death are depicted through medias and fictions. They outline that how we see death and birth through various medias can influence our experience of it. Those representations can open possibilities; for example, showing birth as not necessarily traumatic or dramatic, can transform our understanding of it and change our expectations. In sum, this book is an in-depth account of how neither birth nor death stands alone as events, but rather constitute significant events which imbue an indispensable dignity to the human experience.

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Technologies of the human corpse, by John Troyer, Cambridge and London, The MIT Press, 2020, 272 pp., \$24.95 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-262-04381-6
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Troyer's *Technologies of the Human Corpse* explores human relationships with dead bodies from nineteenth century embalming techniques to contemporary transhumanist ideals and tissue transactions. It is an extremely well written book that provides a historical overview as well as both a political and philosophical analysis of practices and attitudes surrounding the human corpse in the United States; a balanced combination that will offer many insights to death studies scholars and broader (non-academic) audiences. In addition to his excellent analytical discussion of corpse technologies, Troyer makes death personal. By sharing his own experiences of losing his sister and father, captured in poems that are placed as *intermezzos* between the chapters, he forces his readers to think about their own mortality and about the meanings, questions and struggles that death might produce.

Technologies play a key role in Troyer's work, and he uses the term in two particular ways. First, he offers detailed insight in the often invisible technological innovations that have extended 'corpse-time' and transformed the corpse into a consumer product (p. 23). Troyer shows how inventions such as embalming, photography and plastination standardised the human corpse, and simultaneously illustrates how particular bodies, such as the HIV/AIDS corpse, came to disrupt 'the American' concept of a normal dead body (p. 47–54). The other way in which Troyer speaks of technologies, namely in a Foucauldian sense, transforming his 'technologies of the self' to a 'technologies of the corpse'. These technologies include the machines, laws and institutions controlling the dead body whilst, simultaneously, the corpse resists these forms of control. The corpse has a productive potential and is politically active. Inspired by this line of thought, Troyer offers many fascinating insights: he illustrates how HIV/AIDS corpses gave voice to questions of queer identity and equality (p. 65–68), and how the female corpses in Gunther von Hagens's *Body Worlds* are subjected to a sexualisation corresponding to many women's everyday experiences (p. 75–80).

In the last chapters of the book, Troyer delves further into biopolitics (a politics of life), thanatopolitics (a politics of death) and necropolitics (a politics of the dead body). Inspired by the work of Giorgio Agamben and Achilles Mbembé, Troyer shows how corpses can obscure life and death, impacting what it means to be human and even *homo sapiens*. Amongst other

things, Troyer uses the example of encampment – Nazi concentration camps, contemporary prisons or detention centres – to illustrate that those in power create corpses without recognising these corpses as death, thus previously alive. Life and death are not scientific categories, he correctly argues, but political ones.

As I was reading Troyer's book, the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded and the fight for the lives of black people intensified. The chapters on the HIV/AIDS corpse and the growing market in body parts were particularly insightful in view of the current circumstances. How do we perceive the dead bodies arising from Covid-19? What challenges does the Covid-19 corpse bring? And how do inequality, ethnicity and race play a role in this? Although it is impossible to fully capture two centuries of corpse culture in a single book, and despite the thorough political discussions that Troyer offers, questions of socio-cultural and ethnic diversity could have received a bit more attention. What, for instance, about the embalming practices of many African Americans? And what about issues of class and religion? Despite these lingering questions, Troyer's work not only offers valuable insights into our understanding of the human corpse, but also raises many issues to explore in the future.

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